

Azerbaijan: Deepening Ties, Unaddressed Repression

Briefing Note for the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

“Update on the human rights situation in Azerbaijan: Follow-up to European Parliament resolution of 18 December 2025 on the arbitrary arrest and sentencing of academics Bahruz Samadov and Igbal Abilov in Azerbaijan”

4 May 2026

1. The Situation in Azerbaijan: Main Developments and Trends

1.1 Political Imprisonment: An Escalating Crisis

The resolution adopted on 18 December 2025 captured a moment of acute escalation. According to the resolution, since the beginning of 2025 the number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan has surged to close to 400 individuals, detained on politically motivated charges. These include civil society activists, opposition leaders, journalists, academics and human rights defenders.

The two cases at the heart of the resolution remain unresolved:

- Bahruz Samadov, a PhD student at Charles University in Prague, was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment on charges of high treason. His alleged offence: contact and exchanges with Armenian scholars;
- Igbal Abilov, a Talysh ethnic minority researcher and editor-in-chief of Talysh National Academy News, was sentenced to 18 years. His alleged offence: long-standing academic work on Talysh culture.

Both trials were conducted behind closed doors, in violation of international fair trial standards and the presumption of innocence.

Both academics have seen their health deteriorate during imprisonment. These cases follow the arbitrary sentencing of fellow academics Gubad Ibadoghlu and Fazil Gasimov, confirming a deliberate strategy to eliminate independent scholarship.

1.2 Academic Freedom and Media: Systematic Dismantling

Azerbaijani authorities have effectively dismantled the independent media since late 2023. The outlets Abzas Media, Toplum TV, Meydan TV and Kanal 13 were raided and shut down, and at least 30 journalists and media workers were arrested. In February 2025, Turan news agency, the last independent local media headquartered in the country, was forced to close. The same month, BBC was compelled to shut its Baku office, which had operated since 1994. Bloomberg's correspondent had their accreditation revoked, following Voice of America and BBC Azerbaijan. As of May 2026, no independent media operates from within Azerbaijan.

1.3 Political Repression and Transnational Reach

On 1 December 2025, prominent opposition leader Ali Karimli was arrested on coup charges. He remains detained. The resolution expressly condemned his arrest and called for his immediate release.

Repression extends beyond borders: according to an analysis by Freedom House, Azerbaijan ranks third amongst the top perpetrators of transnational repression against journalists over the period 2014 to 2024. Azerbaijani human rights defenders and exiled activists operating in EU Member States face intimidation, harassment and legal threats originating from Baku. Furthermore, trials *in absentia* are [continuously expanding](#).

The recent [forcible expulsion](#) of Afgan Sadigov from Georgian to Azerbaijan raise serious questions of extraordinary rendition.

2. The EU Response: Actions and Gaps

2.1 A Policy Shifted Towards Energy and Geopolitics

Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine accelerated a pre-existing shift in EU policy. The EU now treats Azerbaijan primarily as an energy supplier and transit state. In April 2025, EU High Representative Kaja Kallas visited Baku and agreed to resume negotiations on a new partnership agreement, a process stalled since 2015. Her visit included no public statement on political prisoners, the state of the independent media or civic space, and was celebrated by pro-government Azerbaijani outlets.

The EU has committed EUR 3 billion for transport projects along the Middle Corridor, from which Azerbaijan benefits substantially. The 2022 energy Memorandum of Understanding has not been made conditional on human rights progress.

The EU is Azerbaijan's largest trading partner and biggest investor. This creates leverage. The question is whether it is used.

2.2 What the EU Has Said

The EU raises human rights concerns through diplomatic channels. The EU Delegation in Baku has attended selected hearings. The European External Action Service has issued statements on individual cases. However, a pattern has emerged of stated concern followed by business-as-usual engagement: officials who raise political prisoners one day resume energy and trade negotiations the next, with no publicly stated conditions attached.

2.3 What the EU Has Not Done

Despite the resolution’s explicit call, the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime has not been applied to any Azerbaijani official responsible for politically motivated prosecutions. No EU Member State has proposed such measures.

The EU Special Representative for Human Rights has not publicly reported on meetings with detained academics, as called for in paragraph 7 of the resolution. Partnership agreement negotiations have resumed without publicly stated human rights benchmarks.

3. The 11 March 2026 Joint Statement: A Study in Omissions

On 11 March 2026, European Council President António Costa and President Ilham Aliyev issued a joint press statement from Baku. The statement publicly reflected the EU current priorities and areas of engagement in its relationship with Azerbaijan, while also invited scrutiny as to how these align with its stated principles. Less than three months after the European Parliament adopted its resolution condemning the arbitrary imprisonment of academics and calling for conditionality, the joint statement contains no reference to political prisoners, civil society, media freedom, academic freedom, rule of law or the EP resolution itself. The table below maps its content against the human rights dimensions that the EP resolution identified as central to EU-Azerbaijan relations.

■ **Absent / No conditionality** ■ **Compromised framing** ■ **Partial reference**

Area	What the joint statement says	Assessment	Notes
Values framework	Mutual respect, equality and shared benefit, in full respect of the Charter of the United Nations and international law, including the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States.	Absent	EU values language (democracy, rule of law, human rights) is replaced by Azerbaijan's preferred framing – sovereignty and territorial integrity appear; political prisoners, civil society and human rights are upsent.
New partnership agreement	Swift finalisation of negotiations on a new comprehensive bilateral agreement.	No conditionality	No human rights benchmarks are stated. It contradicts EP resolution §9, which made any future agreement conditional on tangible progress, including the release of political prisoners and the lifting of restrictive legislation.
Energy MoU (2022)	Committed to the further implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding on Strategic Partnership in the field of energy signed in 2022.	No conditionality	MoU reaffirmed without conditions. EP resolution called for human rights conditionality on its implementation. No linkage made.
Connectivity and investment (Middle Corridor / Global Gateway)	Extensive commitments: railway modernisation in Nakhchivan, TRIPP implementation, EUR 3 billion Global Gateway support, new High-Level Working Group on Economic Cooperation.	No conditionality	The EU commits substantial resources and political capital. No human rights conditions are attached to any of these commitments.

People-to-people contacts and education	Enhanced mobility, continued Visa Facilitation Agreement, cooperation in education, culture, youth and research.	Compromised framing	No reference to academic freedom. Two academics were sentenced to 15 and 18 years respectively for their scholarly work. "Education cooperation" is presented as an opportunity, not a rights issue.
Security cooperation	Organised crime, terrorism, extremism, illicit trafficking in weapons and drugs, money laundering, human trafficking and irregular migration.	Compromised framing	No mention of the misuse of national security and anti-terrorism provisions against civil society, academics and journalists, as condemned in EP resolution §4. "Security" is framed only as external threat, not domestic abuse.
COP29	Welcoming the successful outcomes of COP29 held in Baku in November 2024 under the presidency of the Republic of Azerbaijan.	Failed framing	COP29 took place during the most intense period of political repression since Aliyev came to power, including the arrest respectively right before and right after COP29 of the prominent Azerbaijani civil society leaders and co-founders of the Climate of Justice Initiative, Anar Mammadli and Bashir Suleymanli. "Successful outcomes" framing makes no reference to this context.
Political prisoners, human rights defenders, media freedom, civil society, rule of law, ECHR judgments, EP resolution of 18 December 2025	Not mentioned.	Absent	None of the substantive human rights issues identified in the EP resolution appear anywhere in the joint statement.

4. Follow-Up to the Resolution: Status of Key Paragraphs

Resolution paragraph	Status	Notes
§2 – Release of all political prisoners; guarantee of fair trials; end repression	Not implemented	The situation has continued to deteriorate. No named prisoner has been released.
§3 – Immediate release of Ali Karimli	Not implemented	He remains detained on coup charges.
§6 – Consider EU Global Human Rights Sanctions against responsible officials	No action taken	No EU Member State has proposed measures.
§7 – EU Delegation trial monitoring; EU Special Representative meetings with detained academics	Partially implemented	The Delegation monitors some trials. No public confirmation of Special Representative meetings, apart from two meetings with NGOs.
§8 – Increase support to civil society	Unclear	No public reporting on implementation.

5. Avenues of Action for the European Parliament

5.1 Hold the Commission and the EEAS Accountable on Conditionality

Request, from the European Commission and the EEAS, a written account of what human rights benchmarks are attached to the resumed partnership agreement negotiations and to the 2022 energy Memorandum of Understanding. Insist that any agreement remains conditional on the release of all political prisoners and the lifting of restrictive legislation, in line with paragraph 9 of the resolution and with previous parliamentary resolutions.

5.2 Activate the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime

Formally invite the Council to give effect to paragraph 6 of the resolution by identifying Azerbaijani officials responsible for the prosecutions of Samadov, Abilov, Ibadoghlu, Karimli and other political prisoners, and by opening a formal review process under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime.

5.3 Urge Reporting on Trial Monitoring and Access

Invite EEAS to provide a written report on trial monitoring activities of the EU Delegation in Baku since December 2025, and to inform the European Parliament on the EU Special Representative for Human Rights contacts with detained academics. Call on the Vice-President/High Representative to respond publicly on paragraph 7 of the resolution in the absence of such confirmation.

5.4 Actively Highlight Individual Cases at Every Opportunity

Ensure consistent naming individual cases in plenary questions, committee exchanges, and bilateral meetings with Commission and Council officials. The cases of Bahruz Samadov, Iqbal Abilov, Gubad Ibadoghlu, Ali Karimli and the many journalists and human rights defenders detained since 2023 constitute political leverage. The systematic public naming of individual cases reinforces the Parliament's political signal and counters the normalisation of repression in diplomatic interchanges.

5.5 Oppose Business-as-Usual Engagement

Signal clearly to the Commission and Member States that any deepening of energy, trade or connectivity cooperation with Azerbaijan, in the absence of measurable human rights progress, is inconsistent with the European Parliament's resolutions and with the EU's founding values. The 11 March 2026 joint statement — with its extensive commitments on connectivity, investment and energy and its complete silence on human rights — should be raised directly with the European Council and the Commission.

Contact person:

Florian Irminger
Manager, Campaign to End Repression in Azerbaijan
President, Progress & Change Partnerships
florian.irminger@progresschange.org